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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICE

OF

BENSON JOHN LOSSING, LL. D.

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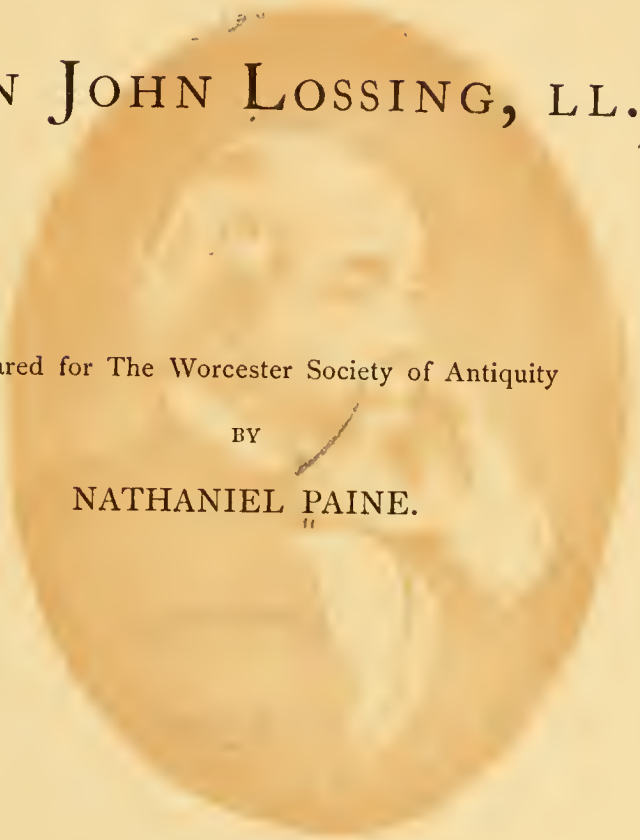

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NATHANIEL PAINE.

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Benson John Lossing, LL. D.

Benson John Lossing, LL. D., who was elected an honorary member of The Worcester Society of Antiquity June 5, 1877, died at his home, "The (Chestnut) Ridge," Dover Plains, New York, June 3, 1891.*

He was born at Beekman, Duchess County, New York, February 12, 1813, and descended from the Dutch. Pietre Pieterse Lassingh, who settled in Albany about 1658, was his ancestor in this country. His grandfather was Nicholas Lossing, a soldier of the revolution, his father was a small farmer who died when Benson was in his infancy. His mother, who was of Quaker parentage, died when he was about twelve years old.

The loss of his father and mother made it necessary for him to earn his own living, and the little education he received, which was of the rudiments only, was acquired at the ordinary district schools in about three years. At thirteen years of age he was apprenticed to a watchmaker at Poughkeepsie, and it was while serving as an apprentice and learning the trade that he first became interested in historical matters, an odd volume of Gibbon's Rome found among some rubbish in the shop being the incentive and first inspiration in this line, in which he was destined to obtain an extended reputation as an historical writer. His

* "The Ridge" is at Dover Plains on the Hudson River, sixteen miles east of Fishkill. The house was built in 1811; the library is contained in a fire-proof building adjoining the house, where are over five thousand volumes of rare books, including many valuable historical autographs, and sketches made by Dr. Lossing of some of the principal actors in the Revolution.

apprenticeship, which lasted for seven years, was a severe one, he being required to work very incessantly, and having but little time for reading or study. He was not allowed to have a fire in the shop on Sundays, and in the severe winter weather was often obliged to remain in bed to keep warm while pursuing his studies. He was not even allowed paper on which to write, yet, notwithstanding these disadvantages, he contributed at the early age of sixteen, prose and poetry to the local newspaper.

He made progress also in his trade, and at nineteen years of age manufactured an old-fashioned English clock, which remained in his possession and stood in his library.

About the year 1830 he became a joint editor and proprietor of The Poughkeepsie Telegraph, and for six years kept up his connection with that enterprise. Afterwards he, with the assistance of two or three friends, started a semi-monthly newspaper called "The Casket," and assumed the editorial chair and wrote stories, poems, essays and editorials, in fact furnished nearly all of the reading matter.

His interest in having appropriate illustrations to his various publications, which became so prominent in later years, seems to have started about this time, for he employed John A. Adams,* a wood-engraver of some note, to instruct him in the art, and by the closest application soon acquired proficiency in that work. In 1838 he removed to New York City, and in the basement of a boarding-house in Cortlandt street hung out his sign as an "Engraver on Wood," his expense for room and meals amounting to four dollars a week. Dr. Lossing says, that when he engaged in the vocation in New York the only wood engravers there were Alexander Anderson, Garret Lansing, J. A. Adams, B. F. Childs and R. N. White.

Lossing's second order, after he started business in New York, was for a cut of the Rutgers Female College, which was given

* J. A. Adams was a native of New Jersey, and a self-taught artist. He engraved many of the illustrations for "Harpers' Family Bible." He also engraved a portrait of the father of Dr. Anderson (the first wood engraver of New York City) for Dr. Lossing's Memoir of Anderson read before the New York Historical Society in 1870.

him by Dr. J. Ferris, Chancellor of the University of New York. There was but little demand for wood engraving at this period, and it was some time before he had another customer, hardly earning enough to keep him from starving. Later he became the editor of, and made the illustrations for, "The Family Illustrated Magazine," the first fully illustrated periodical in the United States, for which he received three hundred dollars a year. He pursued the business of wood engraving for about thirty years, most of the time under the firm name of Lossing & Barritt.

The first book prepared by Dr. Lossing was No. 103 of "Harper's Family Library," an Outline History of the Fine Arts; this was published in 1840. In 1845 he conceived the idea of visiting the historic localities of the war of the revolution, and making drawings of buildings and of other objects of interest which were then to be found in various parts of the original thirteen States of the Union. He suggested to Messrs. Harper & Brothers, in that year the publication of The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution, and they at once became interested in the plan, and advanced money to enable him to carry out his design. Lossing at once started on his travels in search of the necessary materials, returning from time to time with his sketches that he might make the drawings on the block for the engraver. In the meantime, in 1847, he prepared a History of the Revolution in one octavo volume of some five hundred pages, which was written nights and completed in four months.

His Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution, a work which gave him a wide reputation, was completed in about five years, and published in 1851 in two large octavo volumes of some fifteen hundred pages and a large number of illustrations. In the preparation of this great work Dr. Lossing travelled about nine thousand miles in the original thirteen States and Canada, in collecting the material which was used in its production. In 1868 he produced a similar work on the War of 1812, and one on the Civil War, in three volumes of two thousand pages and twelve hundred illustrations, the first volume being published in 1866, the last in 1868. In a letter to the writer of this notice, dated in February, 1866, Dr. Lossing says: "I expect to leave in the course of

a few days for a tour to the principal battle-fields of the late civil war, which will occupy, I suppose, about a hundred days." This will indicate the pains he took in preparing historical works and obtaining illustrations which add so much to their interest and value.

Most of the engravings in his various works were made by Dr. Lossing himself, although in his later years he was assisted by his daughter. He spared neither labor nor pains in the preparation of these valuable volumes, and they are now recognized as historical works of more than common accuracy.

In 1850 there appeared in the London Art Journal a series of very interesting illustrated articles on "The Hudson River from the Wilderness to the Sea," which was published in book form in 1866. He also annotated Custis's Recollections of Washington at the request of Mrs. Robert E. Lee of Arlington, and about the same time prepared the volume entitled "The Home of Washington and its Associations," also fully illustrated.

In 1876 Dr. Lossing wrote "The American Centenary" by request of a Philadelphia publisher, working fourteen hours a day, writing and correcting the proofs with his own hands, and at the same time furnished sixty-four pages a month for "Our Country," a work published in parts.

In 1870 he read before the New York Historical Society "A Memorial of Alexander Anderson, M. D., the First Engraver on Wood in America," which was privately printed in 1872. In 1872–3–4 he edited the "American Historical Record," a magazine of much historical value. "Vassar College and its Founders" was written and illustrated by Dr. Lossing by desire of the Board of Trustees, of whom he had been one since the establishment of the college. Besides his series of historical and biographical works, which numbered forty-two, he wrote or edited many others of value.

In 1855 he received the honorary degree of A. M. from Hamilton College, in 1870 the same degree from Columbia College, and that of LL. D. in 1873 from the University of Michigan. He was a member of the American Antiquarian Society, of the New York Historical Society, an honorary member of the

New England Historic Genealogical Society, and an active or corresponding member of ten or twelve other historical or literary societies.

Dr. Lossing's first wife was a daughter of Thomas Barritt, an Englishman who came to the United States about 1800; his second wife was a daughter of Nehemiah Sweet.

He was a member of the Episcopal Church, and at one time was licensed to hold services, and read sermons to the farmers and their families in his neighborhood. He was "a courteous gentleman of the old school, an able scholar, a rare Christian ennobled by a life of sincerity and worth." He writes of himself: "My life has been one of activity, and I hope useful, and I trust I have added a mite to the treasury of knowledge which will in some degree benefit my fellow beings."

For much of the matter in the foregoing Memorial the writer wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to Miss Helen R. M. Lossing, a daughter of Dr. Lossing; also for aid in preparing the Bibliography of his works.

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Biography of James A. Garfield. 1881.
History of New York City. 1884.
Mary and Martha Washington. 1886.
The Two Spies—Nathan Hale and John Andre. 1886.
The Empire State. 1887.
Hours With Living Men and Women of the Revolution.

At the time of his death he was engaged upon a work entitled "New York City; its Commerce and Industries."

Besides the above work Dr. Lossing, in connection with the late Edwin Williams, compiled—

The Statesman's Manual, 4 vols. 1858.
The National History of the United States, 2 vols. 1855.
A Sketch of Martha Washington.
The League of States.
First in Peace.

He arranged and fully annotated—

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The Old Farm and New Farm; an allegory, by Francis Hopkinson. 1857.
Poems by William Wilson, with a biography of the author.

In addition to these labors he edited for three years "The American Historical Record and Repertory of Notes and Queries."

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